

# The List of Fast Days from the Synagogue of Rehov

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Fig. 1  
The restored list of  
fast days from the  
synagogue of Rehov

The ancient synagogue of Rehov, located south of Beth Shean, was excavated forty years ago (see article by F. Vitto in this issue).<sup>1</sup> Its uniqueness lies primarily in its narthex mosaic, which contained a long halakhic inscription in Hebrew;<sup>2</sup> another important mosaic in the narthex contains a somewhat atypical dedicatory inscription in Aramaic, with the word for “the Temple” in Hebrew (בית המיקדש). The synagogue has been dated to the fifth–seventh century CE.

Below we will focus on the Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions painted on the plaster that covered synagogue’s pillars and walls. It is assumed that most of these inscriptions date to the fifth century CE. Some of the inscriptions were covered by a second layer of plaster, to which new inscriptions were in some cases added. It is unclear when the second layer of plaster was laid. In many cases the second layer of plaster preserves on its underside a mirror image of the earlier inscription that lay beneath it, the second layer having absorbed the paint of the first. These mirror images facilitated the reconstruction of the earlier inscriptions.

Plaster fragments containing parts of seven inscriptions along with miscellaneous fragments of other inscriptions were found on the floor of the synagogue’s nave. Most of them were originally written on the pillars that separated the nave and aisles, but some may have been written on the walls. Some of the inscriptions were enclosed within wreaths. One, containing a unique list of fast days, to be discussed below, was written within a rectangular frame surmounted by a “gable.”

All of the inscriptions are in red paint, apart from no. 7, which is in black. Most appear to belong to the first (lower) layer of plaster. The language of all the inscriptions is Aramaic, apart from the halakhic one, which is written in Hebrew, but the end of





Fig. 3  
Fragment of  
a dedicatory  
inscription (no. 4)

and location among the floor debris, these fragments may be considered part of a single inscription. The subject of the inscription is still unclear, but it may refer to events in the life of the congregation, such as marriages, similar to congregational records known from later periods. This inscription was apparently located near the Torah ark or even directly beside it.

8. Fragments of miscellaneous inscriptions, some of which contain a number of words (fig. 5) and others only isolated letters; some

of the inscriptions are also preserved in mirror image on the back of the second layer of plaster.

The number and variety of inscriptions are unusual and unlike anything discovered to date in the ancient synagogues of the Land of Israel. With the exception of one inscription on plaster from En Gedi, which unfortunately has been lost, we know of no other instances of writing on plaster. Although the phenomenon of wall paintings and mosaics in synagogues is mentioned in rabbinic literature (Talmud Yerushalmi *Avodah Zarah* 3:2, 42d), there are no references to inscriptions *per se* in these sources.

### The List of Fast Days

The list of fast days found in the Rehov synagogue (figs. 1–2) has important implications for Jewish studies. It was written in red paint on the plaster of one of the synagogue’s pillars and itemizes the annually observed fast days. The ten remaining lines of the inscription read as below.

The list is arranged in columns, each line containing the name of a month and its fast day or days. Incised lines divide the list into cells, each cell containing a word or number in letter form. The incision was done after the inscription was written and was

1. [These are] the fast[s] of a[ll] the year [...]					1. ... אלין צומנין דכרן(לה) שתה[...]
2. [Nisan] 27th					2. [ניסן] כז בה
3. I[yar] 18th 22[nd]					3. [איר] יח בה כב בה
4. S[i]va[n] 27th					4. סיוון כז בה
5. Tammuz 17th 27th					5. תמוז יז בה כז בה
6. [A]v [1?]st 9th					6. [אב] ט בה [א?] בה
7. Elul 5th					7. אלול ה בה
8. Tish[rei] [3?]rd 5t[h]					8. תשרי [ג?] בה ה [ב]ה
9. M[arheshvan] 5?th					9. מרחשון ה [בה]
10. [Kislev] ]th					10. [כסלו] בה [

not always executed accurately; as a result, the incised lines sometimes run across the words. The ten preserved lines of text include a title line and nine subsequent lines, each reserved for a month of the year. Thus, it appears that at least three additional lines of text are missing to complete the list of the months, as well as a final line containing a blessing of some sort. The width of the list, divided into five columns, was evidently not much greater than that of the surviving fragment, as can be surmised by the remains of the triangular decoration preserved above the top row containing the title line. It may thus be deduced that the inscription had no additional columns, and, consequently, that there were no more than two fast days in any month.

The day of the month is indicated by a letter/letters, with a line drawn above it/ them. The numerical value of a letter or letters was an accepted way of indicating a date and appears this way on many tombstones as well.

### Fast Days in Rabbinic and Geonic Literature and in Medieval Manuscripts

Talmudic sources mention a few fixed fast days: In addition to Yom Kippur (the 10th of Tishri), which originates in the Torah (Pentateuch), there are four others alluded to by the prophet Zechariah (8:19): “The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals.” These fasts are observed today on the 17th of Tammuz, the 9th of Av, the 3rd of Tishri (the Fast of Gedaliah), and the 10th of Tevet respectively. Of them, only the 10th of Tevet is explicitly dated in the Bible, in Ezekiel 24:1–2: “In the ninth year, on the tenth day of the tenth month, the word of the Lord came to me: O mortal, record this date, this exact day; for this very day the king of Babylon has laid siege to

Jerusalem.” Regarding “the fast of the seventh month” (the Fast of Gedaliah), according to Jeremiah 41:2, Gedaliah ben Ahikam was assassinated in the seventh month, but the exact day on which this occurred is open to interpretation. It would seem that the murder was committed on Rosh Hashanah, the 1st of Tishri, but the 3rd of Tishri was chosen as the fast day since one is forbidden to abstain from eating on Rosh Hashanah. As for the exact dates of “the fast of the fourth month” and “the fast of the fifth month,” these were only fixed in Talmudic times (Mishnah *Ta’anit* 4:6), owing to differences of opinion regarding their exact dates (Talmud Bavli *Ta’anit* 28b–29a; Talmud Yerushalmi *Ta’anit* 4:5, 67b).

Apart from the 9th of Av, which was established by the Talmudic sages as a day of strict fasting, and most of whose laws are similar to those observed on Yom Kippur, the most stringent of fast days, the remaining three fast days were considered less stringent and could be nullified under certain historical or even relatively liberal personal circumstances. No other annual fast days are mentioned in the Talmud.

*Ta’anit Esther* (the Fast of Esther), a fast day currently observed the day before Purim (the 13th of Adar), is not mentioned in the Talmud. Moreover, *Megillat Ta’anit* refers to this day as Nicanor Day, which was, in fact, a day of celebration and not a fast day. While it is true that Talmud Bavli *Megillah* 2a refers to the 13th of Adar as “a day on which all congregate,” a characterization interpreted in the early Middle Ages as referring to a fast day, this does not constitute solid proof that the Fast of Esther was observed in Talmudic times. We know that in the Geonic Period there was a custom of observing three fast days after Purim, at the end of the month of Adar, as a reminder of the three days Esther fasted before going to see the king (*Masekhet Soferim* 21:1–3) – for according to rabbinic

calculations, this event took place in the month of Nisan, on the festival of Passover itself, when one is forbidden to fast. However, most Jewish communities around the world today have accepted the day before Purim as a fast day, though its laws are somewhat more lenient than those of the fast days mentioned above.

It seems, however, that the *geonim* of Babylonia knew of many more annual fast days, since 24 to 36 such days are mentioned in their responsa; there they indicate that they were not always pleased by the observance of these fast days, but the fasts nevertheless remained as originally fixed.<sup>3</sup>

In a recent study, Shulamit Elizur<sup>4</sup> compiled many sources from the Geonic Period and later, including manuscripts from Ashkenaz, Spain, and Italy, that record lists of fast days in several variations, some in Hebrew and some in Aramaic. A number of the manuscripts contain liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) and prayers composed in light of the fast days, similar to many other liturgical poems that were created on the basis of various lists. Some of these sources incorporate the list of fast days in a halakhic composition or prayer book. Although there is a great deal of similarity between the lists, there are also certain differences. All of them include one or more fast day per month, based largely on biblical events but also on those dating to Talmudic times; many of the fasts commemorate the death of a leader or scholar. There were also memorial days that marked traumatic events, such as the incident of the concubine at Gibeah (Judges 19–21). One fast day, memorializing the “seventh earthquake,” stands apart from all the others. Opinions vary as to the meaning of the “seventh earthquake.”<sup>5</sup> While many scholars view it as referring to an earthquake that occurred during a sabbatical year in 748 or 749 CE, Elizur opines that this was a different earthquake, so-called “the

seventh” for eschatological reasons, i. e., the seventh earthquake after a series of six earlier ones heralding the coming of the Messiah.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the interpretation may be, the seventh earthquake was clearly a traumatic episode of neither biblical nor rabbinic origin.

The earliest of the *piyyutim* were composed by Elazar (son of) Haqallir, generally acknowledged as having lived sometime toward the end of the Byzantine Period. Analysis of the synagogue finds indicates that the Rehov inscriptions were written, as mentioned above, in the fifth century CE, several generations before Haqallir. It may thus be concluded that the list of fast days from the Rehov synagogue is the earliest-known list of this type.

The most influential lists of fasts come from Babylonian sources, the best-known appearing in *Halakhot Gedolot*, composed by Rabbi Simeon Kayyara in the eighth or ninth century CE.<sup>7</sup> This list was distributed widely, sometimes as an appendix to *Megillat Ta’anit* (which enumerates holidays), also known as *Ta’anit Batra*; it was included in the *Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 580)*, although its non-obligatory formulation caused not-a-few difficulties for rabbinical authorities charged with making halakhic decisions, since some of the fast days conflicted with days on which it is halakhically forbidden to fast, (e. g., the first day of the month of Nisan, commemorating the deaths of Nadav and Abihu). Elizur maintains that the tradition of fasting has three main offshoots – those of the Land of Israel and of Babylonia, which have been known for some time; and that of Italian provenance.

The list from the Rehov synagogue predates all the others and appears to be an actual list of fast days that were observed in synagogues in the Land of Israel for generations before Haqallir perpetuated their memory in his liturgical poems. Its



Fig. 4  
Fragment of  
an inscription  
mentioning the sixth  
year of the sabbatical  
cycle



Fig. 5  
Fragment of an  
inscription with the  
names "Jerusalem"  
and "Israel"

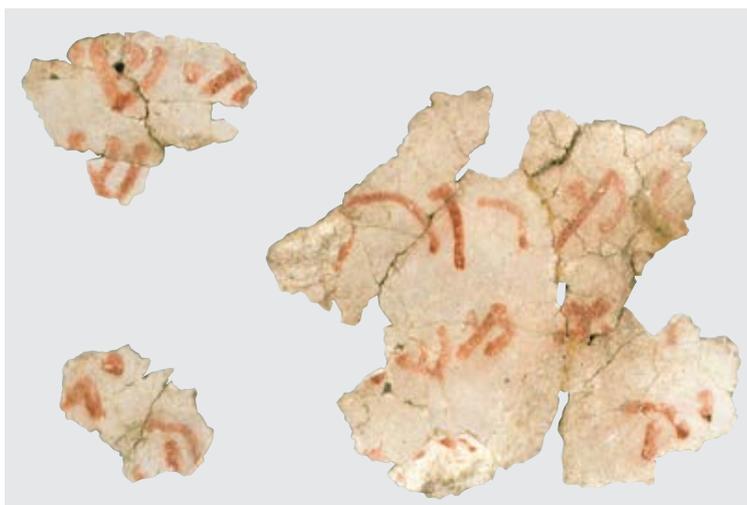


Fig. 6  
Fragment of the  
list of the priestly  
courses (*mismarot*)

authenticity lies in the fact that it lacks any supporting argumentation: the historical, national element was removed and the emphasis was placed on the practice itself. All the inscriptions from this synagogue – the list of permitted vegetables and fruits and the blessings for the congregation, for example – give a similar impression. All are lists related to practical halakhic matters and the daily life of the congregation.

That the list reflects actual practice is further suggested by the fact that more than one fast day is recorded per month; later lists containing only one fast day per month (with a few outstanding exceptions) seem to be more schematic. One Geonic responsum, as mentioned, refers to 24–36 fasts, i. e., two to three per month. These numbers, too, as multiples of 12, also seem to have been schematized. Other lists, by contrast – such as that of the above-mentioned Simeon Kayyara – are inconsistent, as is the Rehov synagogue list of fast days wherein some months have one fast day and some months have two.

Lines 2–10 in the Rehov synagogue list end with the word **בנה** (= “in it”), i. e., in a specific month. In most cases the word appears twice as a technical necessity to

indicate the day in the month, thereby avoiding repetition of the name of the month appearing in the first column. This parallels Rabbi Pinhas’s eighth-century CE liturgical poem, “The Sanctification of the Months,” composed in the Land of Israel.<sup>8</sup> Its verses mention each month and its events, and each of its lines ends with the word **בנה** (also meaning “in it”). This has been the term used since biblical times to indicate a month whose name had just been mentioned (e. g., Esther 3:12 and elsewhere).

### Line-by-Line Commentary

**The title line.** No known explanation alludes to the source of the custom of observing fast days. Later lists have titles that attribute additional importance to the enumerated fasts by indicating that they are based on the Torah (this is the style used in *Ta’anit Batra*). Such attributions were undoubtedly not to be taken literally, as most of the events commemorated by the fasts took place much later than the events recounted in the Torah. It appears that attribution to the Torah was meant to reinforce, albeit in an exaggerated fashion, the congregation’s sense of obligation to observe the fasts commemorating the troubles and disasters that befell the Jewish people – an obligation whose source, according to the author of the inscription, was the Torah itself. A title line similar to the one in the Rehov inscription is preserved in the Italian tradition, “Twenty-Two Fast Days in the Twelve Months of the Year.”<sup>9</sup> Our inscription may have also included a number at the head of the list, and it may have had a total of twenty-two fasts, as well. Since the month of Sivan has only one listed fast day, the same may be true for the month of Elul, while the other months whose names and dates have been preserved have two fast days each.

**The 27th of Nisan.** The 26th or, sometimes, the 28th of Nisan is referred to in several sources as a fast day commemorating the death of Joshua bin Nun, which, according to a Babylonian tradition documented by Rabbi Simeon Kayyara in *Halakhot Gedolot*, is said to have occurred on that day. Some of the manuscripts mentioning the 26th may have actually meant the 27th, which has a very similar written form. Elizur notes an Italian manuscript in which the 27th is spelled out in words. In the Rehov synagogue list, the 27th is the second date recorded, as the preceding columns have not been preserved. Traditions from the Land of Israel date the deaths of Miriam and Aaron's sons to the 1st and 6th<sup>10</sup> or 10th of Nisan, respectively, and it is possible that one of these dates preceded the 27th.

**The 18th of Iyar.** According to traditions from the Land of Israel, this was the day on which Joshua bin Nun died. In a liturgical poem from the Land of Israel published by Ezra Fleischer,<sup>11</sup> this was also the date of an earthquake. An earthquake would seem to be a more genuine reason to proclaim a fast, as the dates of biblical events had by this period been forgotten and were usually only based on later calculations. Earthquakes, by contrast, were traumatic events that invariably left indelible marks on the generations that experienced them. It is possible that an earthquake is the true explanation for this fast day, and that the death of Joshua bin Nun was commemorated in Nisan (see above). However, we know of no traditions containing both these dates that also provide the reasons for the fasts, and thus any conclusion in this regard is speculative. It is equally possible that these events were added in a later period and were not necessarily based on solid tradition, or that a later tradition was created to combine several alternatives.

**The 22nd of Iyar.** Several traditions maintain that the 10th of Iyar was the date of Eli the priest's passing. To the best of our knowledge, a fast on the 22nd of Iyar is not preserved in any early source.

**The 27th of Sivan.** This date is mentioned in most of the lists that have come down to us, but each list provides a different reason for the fast. Some lists regard it as the day the prophet Samuel died (attributed elsewhere to the 28th of Iyar); in others it is the day Eli the priest died (also attributed to the 22nd of Iyar; see above). Still other lists associate the 27th of Sivan with the executions of Rabbis Hanina ben Teradion, Simeon ben Gamaliel, and others in the wake of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. In various other lists this event is also commemorated on the 26th, 28th, or 29th of Sivan, from which we may conclude that different versions of the tradition must have existed. The fact that the 27th of Sivan is included in the Rehov synagogue list may serve to resolve difficulties in later lists.

**The 17th of Tammuz.** This fast, commemorating the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem, is one of the four fast days mentioned in Talmudic literature that appears in all the known lists. The authors of many of the lists do not bother to mention the reason for the fast, possibly assuming that everyone was familiar with it.

**The 27th of Tammuz.** This date does not appear in any other known list of fast days. One Italian source records the 7th of Tammuz as the date the Israelites died at the hand of the Kenites – an event that is not documented outside the Italian traditions and which is also attributed by them to other dates.

**The 1st? of Av.** This date is included here since it appears in most of the known lists

as the date of Aaron the high priest's death (Numbers 33:38) and there is a space for it in Rehov synagogue list before the 9th of Av. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that the sources from the Land of Israel, such as the liturgical poems of the Haqallir and "The Sanctification of the Months" of Rabbi Pinhas do not mention this date, nor does it appear in the remains of the Genizah prayer book published by Margaliot.<sup>12</sup>

**The 9th of Av.** This fast, which commemorates the destruction of the Temple, is, in all Jewish communities, the most stringent of fast days after Yom Kippur.

**The 5th? of Elul.** The liturgical poems of Haqallir and Rabbi Pinhas commemorate this date as one on which two righteous men died, possibly from among the ten martyrs executed by the Romans following the Bar Kokhba Revolt; Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion may have been one of them. In the Genizah prayer book published by Margaliot, this was the day on which ten of the twelve men who scouted the Land of Israel died (Numbers 13); some sources attribute this event to the 8th of Elul, while others refer to the 7th of Elul or other dates in the calendar.

**The 3rd? of Tishri.** This date, commemorating the assassination of Gedaliah ben Ahikam, is included in our reconstruction of the Rehov synagogue list because it is one of the four fast days mentioned in Talmudic literature and there is a space for it in the list.

**The 5th of Tishri.** According to the Italian tradition, this was the day on which the Romans arrested Rabbi Akiva following the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Both *Halakhot Gedolot* and *Ta'anit Batra* connect this date to Rabbi Akiva's arrest, as well. The Land of Israel tradition, however, marks this event

as taking place in Elul. No other fast days are mentioned for this month in the Rehov synagogue list, as its authors saw no need to include Yom Kippur, the 10th of Tishri, which is mentioned in the Torah itself.

**The 5th? of Marheshvan.** The date is included here, yet only hypothetically. The fragment bearing the letter for the 5th (ה, or possibly ח, standing for the 8th), which is identifiable by the horizontal stroke at the top of the letter, does not fit together with any of the other fragments. It is possible that this fragment belongs to the month of Marheshvan, for according to the Italian tradition and the prayer book published by Margaliot, the 5th of Marheshvan is the date the sons of Zedekiah were executed (2 Kings 25:7); in the other known lists the event is tied to the 7th of the month. Alternatively, the 5th might belong to the month of Adar, since this was the day on which, according to the Italian tradition, the martyrs Lulianus and Pappus were executed, and indeed, many details on the Rehov synagogue list correspond to those appearing in the lists of the Italian tradition.

The rest of the list is missing and cannot be reconstructed.

## Summary

Despite its fragmentary state and the questionable completions of some words and dates, the Rehov synagogue list is unparalleled by any of the later traditions known to us. At least two of the dates are not mentioned on any other lists (the 22nd of Iyar and 27th of Tammuz) and, contrary to our expectations, dates associated with traditions of the Land of Israel do not appear on this list, while those relating to the Italian or Babylonian traditions (e.g., the 27th of Nisan, the 5th of Tishri, and, if our reconstruction is correct, the 1st of Av) do. The manuscript of the

prayer book published by Margalioth, which postdates the compositions of Haqallir and Rabbi Pinhas, is much closer to the Rehov synagogue list than to any other source from the Land of Israel.

Nonetheless, the incomplete state of the list does not allow us to pinpoint its affinity with any one source. At this rudimentary stage of the research, we must confine ourselves to concluding that the Rehov synagogue list of fast days is the earliest-known exemplar of its kind to date and that some portions of its traditions have been lost over the ages. It is impossible to determine if there were any parallel contemporary traditions. Therefore, on the basis of the information gleaned from this list, we cannot reach any firm conclusions regarding the evolution of the tradition of fast days in the various communities of the Land of Israel.

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\* Photos: © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by V. Naikhin. Drawing: © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by J. Rodman.

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<sup>2</sup> Sussmann 1977, and the extensive literature on this inscription.

<sup>3</sup> Lewin 1933, 17; Elizur 2007, 115, n. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Elizur 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See the various opinions spelled out in Tsafrir and Foerster 1992, 231.

<sup>6</sup> Elizur 2004, 4–7.

<sup>7</sup> Elizur 2007, 41ff.

<sup>8</sup> Elizur 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Elizur 2007, 115.

<sup>10</sup> Margalioth 1973, 141–42.

<sup>11</sup> Fleischer 1983–84, 93–94. See, however, the reservations of Elizur 2007, 33 n. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Margalioth 1973.

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